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ABSTRACT

An analysis of the skills involved in listening comprehension and techniques for developing them in students looks first at elements of the general process of interpretation, showing the essential importance of the interpretative functions as contrasted with simple comprehension of sounds and decoding of meaning. The first section looks at research on the factors in the listening process and the language learner's tasks in interpretation. The second section analyzes the problems second language students experience and teachers must attempt to resolve in the instruction of listening comprehension, especially in English as a second language. The factors affecting student processes of interpretation are categorized and discussed in three groups: linguistic, sociopsychological, and communicative. The final section outlines theoretical and practical suggestions on how to overcome the problems with appropriate activities. The techniques are divided into three groups for use before, during, and after listening, and emphasis is placed on exploitation of inexpensive materials for classroom use. A bibliography is appended. (MSE)

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LISTENING COMPREHENSION:
PROCESS PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

July 1984

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Introduction

This paper is divided into three different sections. Section One will deal with the explanation of what the art of interpretation involves. Considerations of the constituents of the process will be made with the specific purpose of showing the essential importance of the interpretative functions as opposed to the simple comprehension of the sounds and decoding of the meaning.

Section Two will be an analysis of the problems that teachers of languages generally face when teaching listening comprehension in either EFL or ESL situations. Finally Section Three will contain some theoretical and practical suggestions on how to overcome the problems with appropriate activities. An analysis of the most suitable techniques will be made with emphasis on the exploitation of inexpensive materials.

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

-Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking-Glass.

S E C T I O N O N E

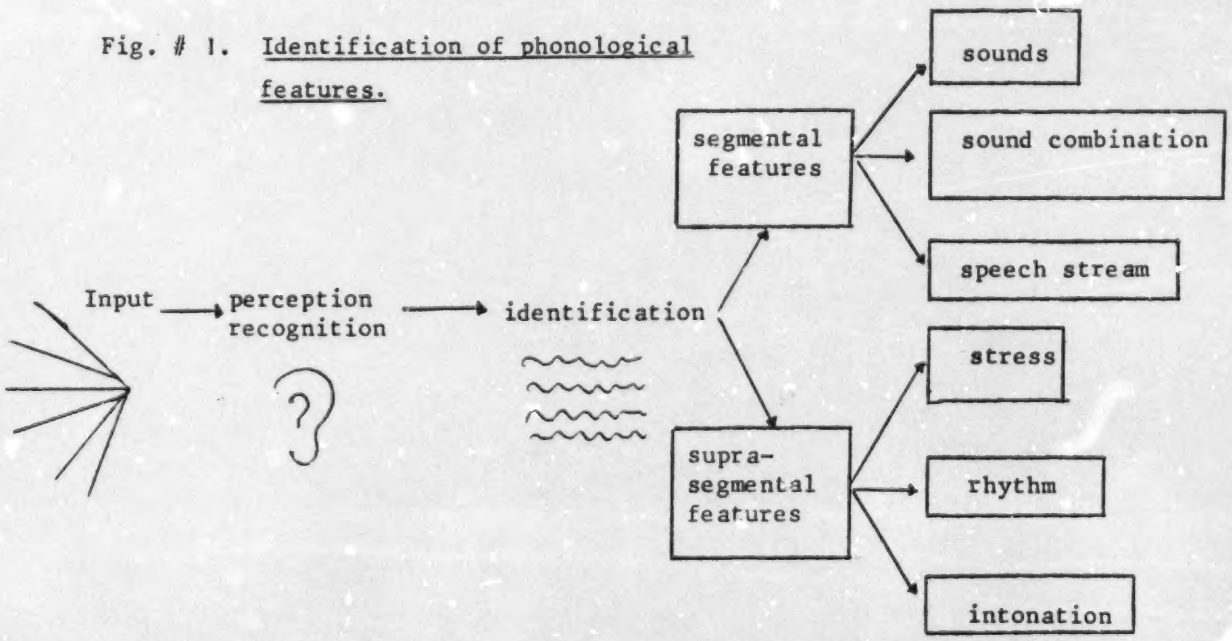
1.1. The process.

The components of human languages are: phonology, syntax and semantics. Their combination constitutes the essence of sentences. But sentences have no reason to exist if they do not convey meanings: ideas. Clark and Clark say that:

> A very important function of sentences is to specify the ideas around which a speech act is built. These ideas are conveyed by the propositional content sometimes called the ideational content, of a sentence (1977:29).

In order to get the ideational content of the sentence, to interpret what they hear, listeners have to process the stream of language through the phonological, the syntactic and the semantic channels. Phonologically[1] speaking the features

Fig. # 1. Identification of phonological features.



illustrated in Fig. # 1 need to be recognized but it is no longer clear whether or not we comprehend following step by step the sequence: perception of the sounds, recognition of the segments, comprehension of the syntactic structures, decoding of the meaning and interpretation of the message.

In effect, psycholinguists and linguists (see Clark and Clark, 1977; Slobin, 1972; Chomsky, 1965) suggest that listeners, when exposed to their native language, identify what they hear through propositional constituents. On the same subject, Richards states that:

> Listeners make use of two kinds of knowledge to identify propositions: knowledge of the syntax of the target language and real world knowledge. Syntactic knowledge enables the listener to chunk incoming discourse into segments or constituents (1983:220).

For example, given the sentence (1)

(1) It's hot in here.

the listener will divide the sentence into the constituents of (1a) and not (1b)

(1a) It's hot / in here.

(1b) It's / hot in here.

"The ability to correctly identify chunks or constituents is a by-product of grammatical competence" (ibid.: 220). To this, Kalivoda adds that "the human mind has an uncanny capacity for seeing how different parts of the context relate to one another" (1980:3). The activity of chunking helps us to comprehend what we hear. Clark and Clark state that:

> when listeners interpret a sentence, their immediate goal is to build an underlying representation for the sentence....[They] take a linear string of words and from it construct a hierarchical arrangement of propositions (1977:45-45).

This mental process of construction enables the listeners to "turn words into ideas, trying to reconstruct the perceptions, feelings and intentions they were meant to grasp" (ibid.: 3). In short the listener's tasks are: 1. identification of the constituents of the sentence; 2. comprehension of the same, and 3. interpre-

tation of the speech act (see Austin, 1962; Searle, 1970)

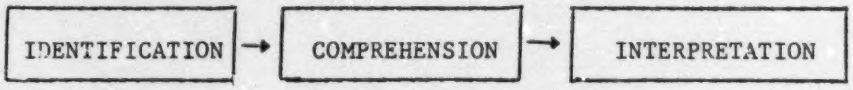


Fig. # 2. The listener's tasks.

Quoting Clark and Clark's analysis of the comprehension process, Richards summarizes as follows:

1. the listener takes in raw speech and holds an image of it in short-term memory
2. an attempt is made to organize what was heard into constituents, identifving their content and function
3. as constituents are identified, they are used to construct propositions, grouping the propositions together to form a coherent message
4. once the listener has identified and reconstructed the propositional meanings, these are held in long-term memory, and the form in which the message was originally received is deleted (1983:221).

In our native language we follow the entire process with little or no effort. We listen to news on the radio, programmes on TV , friends, neighbours, salesmen, etc. The amount of time that we spend in listening activities is phenomenal -- certainly much more than in speaking, reading or writing. We listen in order to get information (eg. lectures, directions, doctors, etc.); we listen for the pleasure of it (eg., music, concerts, etc.); we listen because we have nothing else to do (eg. on the bus, on the train, etc,); we listen even when we wouldn't or shouldn't: we listen to comprehend what we are hearing.

The process of comprehension, as we have seen, is 'mental' and almost subconscious. If we ask someone to describe what happens when s/he listens we will get an answer such as: "I don't know, but I understood what the speaker said." If we then go on asking: "What did the speaker say?" The answer will be his/her personalized interpretation of what s/he has listened to. Almost none will repeat

verbatim what the speaker said. What the listener will repeat is the gist of what s/he heard, what struck his/her curiosity, what triggured his/her attention. And it is this gist that will be stored and remembered. No doubt this is the main reason why people can even swear to have heard something when the contrary may actually be true.

The fact that we process what we hear is essential. We couldn't possibly store every single word we are exposed to otherwise our memory would be overloaded with the consequence that it would be impossible to recall something without being submerged by useless details. Since the process of reduction varies from one person to another, experience is stored differently. Consider for a moment the numberless versions of the same fact offered by witnesses at trials and you will realize that this is true!

Let us return to sentence (1)

(1) It's hot in here.

we have said that a good listener divides what s/he hears into constituents. This division helps him/her in remembering the main ideas. What we haven't said is that the listener has to go a step beyond comprehension if s/he wants to interpret what s/he is exposed to. Taken for granted that the speaker is not violating any maxims (see Grice, 1975), there can be several reactions to sentence (1). Consider for example the following sentences:

(2) Shall I open the window?

(3) You'd better take your sweater off!

(4) You're right!

(5) Turn the heater off.

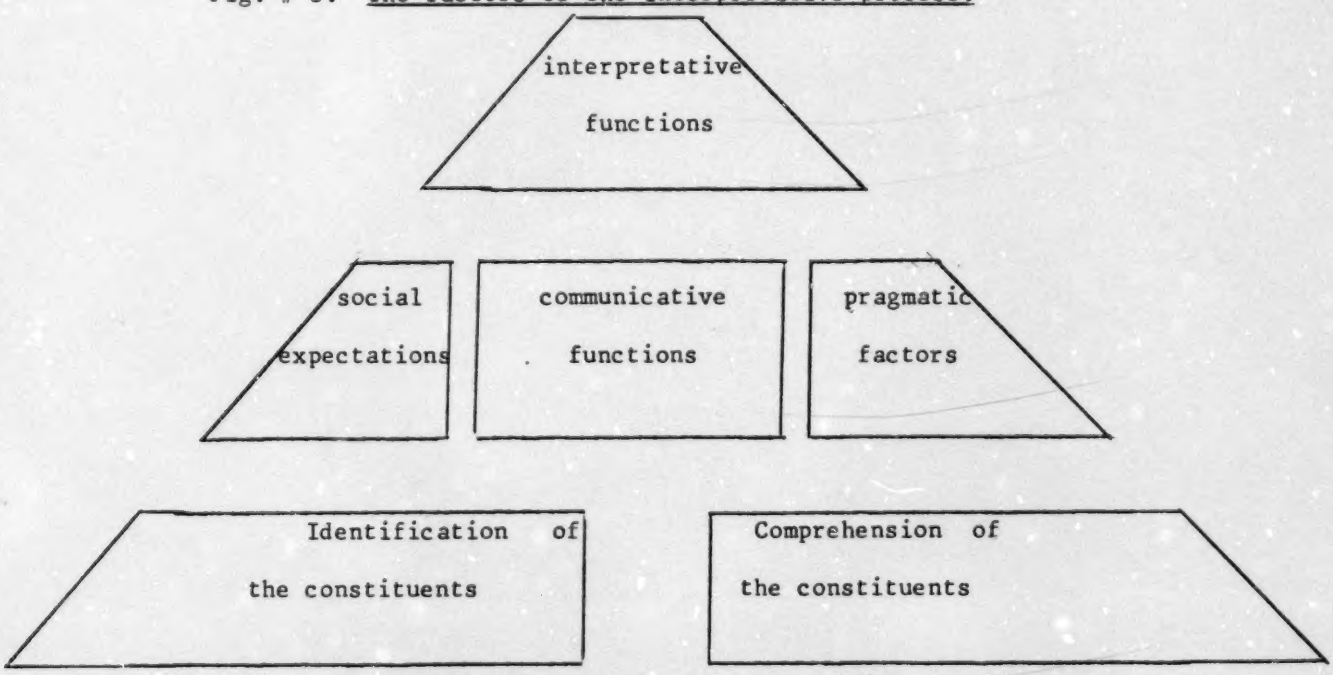
(6) Would you like to have something to drink?

None of these reactions is ungrammatical, illogical or inappropriate. Actually

sentences (2), (3), (4), (5) and (6) are all possible responses to sentence (1). What makes them appropriate is the situation: the speech event. In Hymes' terms (1964) the listener has to consider who speaks to whom, why, where and when if the interpretation of the message is to be adequate. To be more precise, the listener has to consider a series of communicative functions such as: 1. the symptomatic functions (recognition of sex, age of the speaker, etc.); 2. the conversational function; 3. the textual function; 4. the logical or factual function (relation of participants and circumstances).[2] Only when all these functions are taken into consideration, in fact, is the message interpreted. In this way sentence (1) can have the indirect value of a request, a suggestion, a confirmation, an order, an offer.[3]

Interpretation is then, hierarchically speaking, the highest level of comprehension that listeners and language learners can reach. Figure # 3 can help in visualizing the factors of the interpretative process in a new hierarchical schema.

Fig. # 3. The factors of the interpretative process.



Clark and Clark say that: "in speaking or comprehending new languages people implicitily conform to a system that relates sounds to meanings" (1977:5). Now, if the system is unknown, in the case of a student acquiring a new language, problems can be forseen. This is why listening-comprehension activities should have a pre-eminent position in EFL or ESL classes. Gingras defines "language acquisition as active listening," and, in pointing out that "the importance of listening activities has been underscored by researchers," he states that "comprehension should precede production" (1978:95).

Listening is no longer considered a passive skill. Rather, applied linguists (see Littlewood, 1981; Hammerly, 1982; Finocchiaro and Brumfit, 1983; Brown, 1983) consider it a lively activity which involves "a series of sub-skills in our perception of the message" (McDowell, 1983:36). The changes in perspective were provoked by research in second language acquisition (see Krashen, 1982; Swain, 1974; Wong Fillmore, 1984), psycholinguistics (see Clark and Clark, 1977; Slobin, 1971), sociolinguistics (see Hymes, 1964; Searle,1970; Fishman, 1969) and applied linguistics (see Postovsky, 1970; Asher,1969).

While teaching Russian at the Defense Language Institute in Monterrey, Postovsky (1970) found that when special emphasis is given to listening activities, in the initial stages of second language acquisition, the oral production obtained when the students feel comfortable speaking is far better both phonologically and syntactically. Asher's experiments (1969), related to the teaching of German, proved Postovsky's findings right. In his Total Physical Response technique, Asher required his students to show the comprehension of the message through physical responses. No oral production was required unless the students so desired. The TPR technique also showed that oral production was better when obtained spontaneously and after a period of silent exposure to the target language.

As a result of this change in "focus," many language teaching approaches opt

for a period of silent exposure to the second language (see Krashen and Terrell, 1983; Curran, 1976; Asher, 1977) and stress the importance of adequate training in the listening skill.

Figure # 4 shows the areas which each constituent of the interpretative process focuses on. Given that these areas are all necessary to interpret the message, time should be devoted to each.

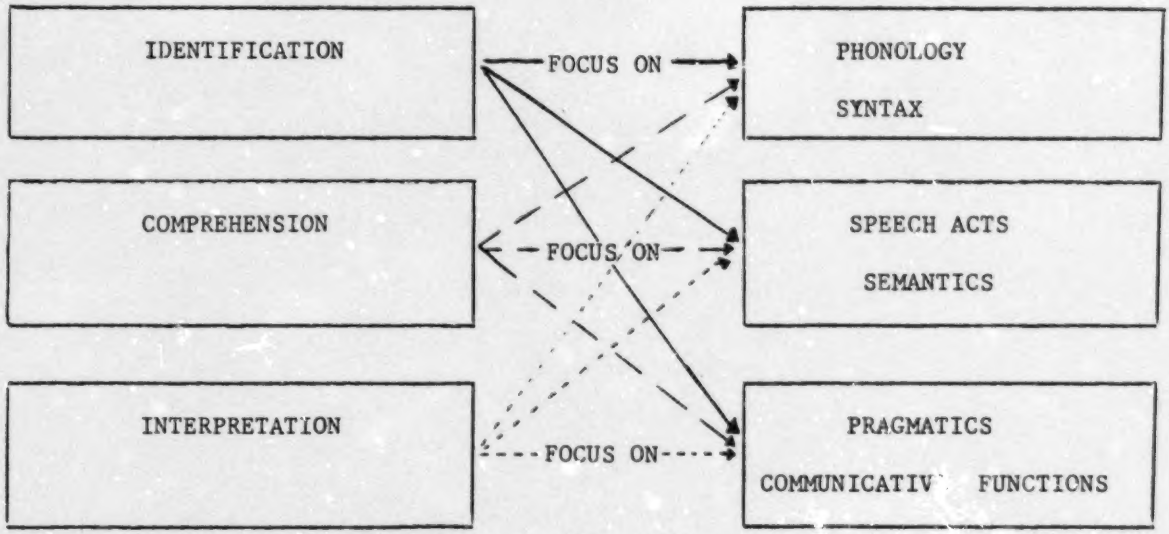


Fig. # 4. The language learner's tasks for interpretation.

We have seen that listening is far from being an easy task in second language learning. It deserves specific attention and adequate training from the initial exposure to the language.

> Language is the medium through which the manners, morals, and mythology of a society are passed on to the next generation....It is a basic ingredient in virtually every social situation....As the main vehicle of human communication, language is indispensable....Communication with language is carried out through two basic human activities: speaking and listening....They are mental activities that hold clues to the very nature of the human mind (Clark and Clark, 1977:3).

It is the 'mental' factor that makes the interpretative process difficult to be taught. In the following two sections we will analyze the problems that teachers in EFL/ESL situations face and consider possible solutions.

Out of the abundance of the heart

the mouth speaketh.
-New Testament. Matthew XII,34.

... and students listen.
- Lalla. 1981.

S E C T I O N T W O

2.1. The Problems.

In section one we have seen that the process of interpretation is based on a variety of factors. We will now begin analyzing the problems that students experience and teachers must attempt to resolve. The following three tables contain the main factors which, in my ten-year experience of EFL teaching, I have found affecting my students processes of interpretation.

Linguistic factors.
- knowledge of the target language: recognition and comprehension of segmental and supersegmental features, lexicon, syntax, and semantics - degree of complexity - speed of delivery - memory - recognition of false cognates - difficulty in getting the gist

Table # 1

Socio-psychological factors.
- individual attitude towards the target language - anxiety and panic - recognition of the roles of the participants - degree of alertness and attention - familiarity with the topic - interest in the topic - degree of credibility - motivation - adequate topic for the audience

Table # 2

Table # 3

Communicative factors.
- recognition of different registers - degree of familiarity with various accents, dialects - knowledge of formulas, clichés, etc. - familiarity with the speaker's voice - recognition of the speaker's pragmatic intention(s) - different cultural background - conversational turn-takings - acoustic environment; noise, interference - capacity of prediction - familiarity with planned and unplanned speech: false starts, hesitations, redundancy, fillers, etc. - meaningful pauses

2.1.1. Linguistic factors.

The learner's familiarity with the target language certainly plays a large role in the interpretative process. Interpretation cannot occur if it is not preceded by recognition of sounds--structural forms and meanings of the language itself. The more target language the learner knows the more target language s/he will understand. Littlewood points out that:

> when listening, however, he (the learner) cannot normally exercise any control over the language that is used: he must be prepared to extract meaning, as best he can, from whatever language is directed at him. It is therefore not enough that he should merely be able to understand the same range of language that he can speak: his receptive repertoire must be matched not against his own productive repertoire, but against the productive repertoire of the native speaker he will need to understand (1981:65).

It follows that, using Nord's words, the learner will need:

> ... much greater fluency in listening than speaking....In terms of the range of lexicon and structure, the comparable capabilities might be illustrated by the areas of two concentric circles:

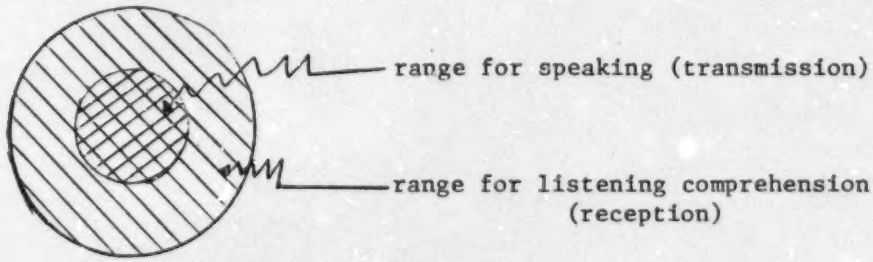


Fig. #5 From: J.R. Nord (1976:13).

The degree of complexity will automatically be closely related to the knowledge of the language: what is unknown will be considered difficult and complex and what is known easy and perceivable. The speed of delivery further affects the process of comprehension. What may be comprehensible in a classroom situation with the teacher's caretaker-talk[4] may be incomprehensible outside the class in a real communicative situation.

> Most foreign learners will not acquire a comfortable ability to listen and understand the foreign language as spoken by native speakers if they only listen to their teacher and classmates and feedback from their own spoken production (Brown & Yule, 1983:55).

Another problem is constituted by the capacity of long-term memory for storing the information received. "Essential in listening is that the learner remembers the important details of the first part of the message while he continues to listen to the other parts " (Finocchiaro & Bonomo, 1973:107). The stream of speech, in fact, whether the listener is attentive or not, whether s/he comprehends or not, doesn't stop, and the process is <u>irreversibile</u> unless an open request for repetition is made. "If only I could remember it all!" (Rivers, 1972:69) Does this sound familiar? To me, it does! Many times I have heard my students saying the same thing. Our everyday experiences are processed and the gist is stored (see Brown,1978; Byrne, 1980; Clark and Clark, 1977; Richards, 1983). This selective process of the initial input (see fig. # 6) is almost authomatic in our native language but it is obviously

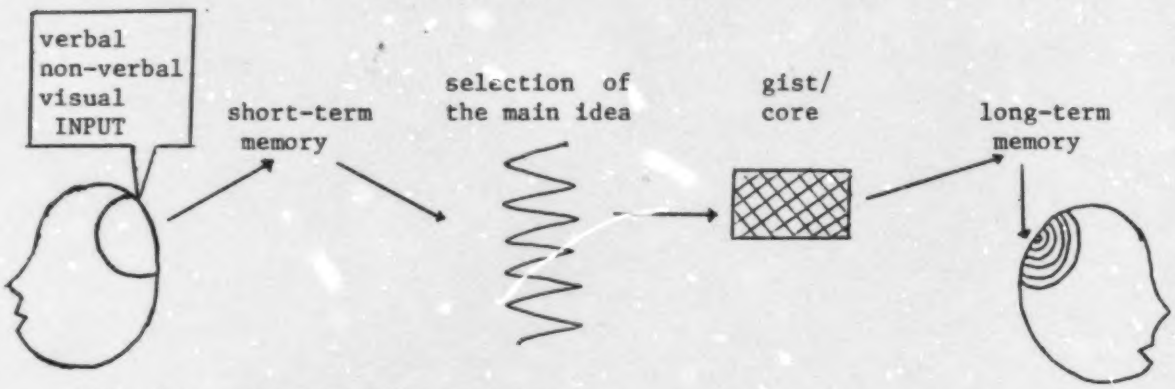


Fig. # 6. <u>The selective process.</u>

painful in a second language. The reason why is clear: "the foreign-language learner has to connect new forms and new lexical items with known meanings and sometimes must register new meanings for which the first language has not yet established connections" (Rivers, 1972:73).

Thus, in listening activities, the language learner needs to be helped in the selection of the relevant concepts to be stored. "What the mind is doing during language learning activities will determine what is stored, in what form, and whether it is retrievable and usable in new contexts" (Rivers, 1972:72).

2.1.2. Socio-psychological factors.

The specific problems of this area essentially depend on the learner's attitude, feelings and fears. When acquiring a new language, particularly in an EFL situation "neologofobia--the fear of new words--is acute. Panic, which attends the first unknown word in a discourse, may become paralysis after the second or third" (James and Mullen, 1973:21). ESL/EFL listening activities, when conducted in an artificial situation, with artificial materials under the constant fear of being tested on the one hand and being put in a ridiculous position in front of the class on the other, will certainly be useless. Such situations will raise the learner's affective filter (see Krashen, 1982). As a consequence, the comprehension and following interpretation of the message will be seriously affected. The more the learner's attitude towards the target language is negative, the more s/he will avoid any opening to the language itself. On the contrary, the more the learner's attitude is positive, the more s/he will apply adequate strategies to interpret the message. The strategies will essentially resemble those s/he uses in the mother tongue such as: guessing, formulating mental presuppositions, listening for the gist, etc.

We have seen that the learner interprets the reality of the target language through his/her native language perspective. "A student comes to class with two vital assets: his own knowledge and experience of the world around him and a well developed set of language skills of his own" (Fish, 1981:107). There will, then, be topics which will be more stimulating, more useful, more familiar, more interesting, more adequate to the average age of the audience than others. And, generally speaking, the learner's attitude towards the language will vary in accordance with these factors. The degree of attention, the interest in interpreting the message, the motivation, the degree of comprehension will all improve. It follows that, the more interesting the listening activity is, the more psychologically relaxed the learner is, the lower the inhibitions are, the more easily s/he will interpret the message. Our cognitive processing is, in fact, strongly affected by emotional factors (see Schumann 1978, 1980). "Nervous or embarassed students cannot 'hear' well, or 'hear' what was never said" (Rivers, 1983:97).

In his studies on 'ego permeability,' Guiora found out that in learning a new language the students have to 'wear' a new identity, giving up their real identities temporarily. He and his associates conducted an experiment on eighty-seven students of the University of Michigan with the main goal of demonstrating that, under the effect of alcohol, empathy is largely reduced. The results of the experiment showed that both comprehension and production of the target language improve when affective factors do not obstruct the process of perception and assimilation of the new language (see Guiora et al.,1972).

2.1.3. Communicative factors.

It is generally accepted that language should be taught for communicative purposes, both oral and written commmunication. In reading a written text the

learner's task is certainly facilitated. S/he can read again and again, as many times as required to interpret the author's message. The learner can look words up in the dictionary, can ask for help, can consult a geography book or even an encyclopedia. In short s/he can take the necessary time to work the solution out. Even when writing or speaking the learner is facilitated. It is true that what s/he will write or say depends on the knowledge of the language, the circumstances, the topic, the time, the roles of the participants and the personal affective factors, but the quantity and the quality of the speech act will be essentially defined by the learner in person.

As we have already seen, when exposed to listening activities the learner is no longer capable of limiting the quantity of language that strikes his/her ears. Besides that, the act of communication, particularly if spontaneous and natural, is on the one hand full of false starts, hesitations, fillers, redundancy, meaningful or meaningless pauses, and is on the other affected by the environment with possible interferences and/or noises. Brown says that:

> Speech is not, on the whole, used for transmission of detailed information. When it is it tends to be backed up with visual, if not written, aids....When speech is used for the transmission of facts, as in a news, broadcast, we find that a special structure is evolved which allows the main points to be made several times: first we have the headlines, then the announcement in short sentences, then a comment which repeats the content of the announcement and then, at the end, the reiteration of the headlines.... There are of course occasions where speech is used for primarily transactional purposes- in, for instance, buying and selling,... (but) we tend to find that information packed utterances typically come in short bursts (1978:275).

In interpreting the sequence of unplanned conversational turn-takings, the learner will be further limited by the reduced capacity for prediction in L2 and the lack of exposure to different kinds of accents or dialects. It follows, then, that the learner's listening task is extremely demanding.

The enumerated problems, while being correct in an ESL situation, become aggravated in an EFL situation. Any EFL context, where no native-speakers of

the target language are easily available and where radio programmes in L2 are not transmitted, has no other solutions to the problem than the language laboratory, or less expensive equipment such as the tape-recorder(see Landolfi, 1984).

From Krashen's input theory (1982) we learn that the more comprehensible input (i+1) the learner gets, the sooner and the better his/her performance, both in comprehension and in production, will be. Krashen even goes a step further, saying that the learner's outputs will serve as a stimulus to get extra input. It follows that "listening comprehension precedes and serves as a basis for speaking"(Chastain, 1971:162). If Krashen's theory is right, learners should be required to listen much more than speak. The implication is that the language class should attempt to create an environment similar to first language acquisition, when the child's initial silent period is long but active (see Krashen and Terrell, 1983).

The problems, while large in number and varied in nature, are not impossible to overcome. Adequate techniques and good selections of activities will be the answer to the majority of them.

And gladly would he learn

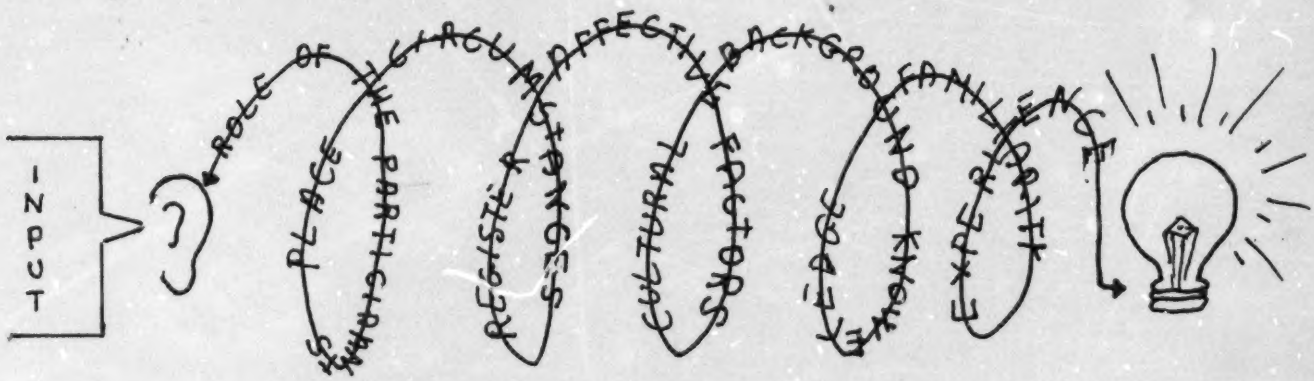
and gladly teach.

- Chaucer, Canterbury Tales, Prologue.

S E C T I O N T H R E E

3.1. The solutions.

In the previous two sections we have seen that the process for interpretation of messages is multifaceted, interwoven as it is with socio-psycho-cultural aspects (see fig. # 7).



1. hearing 2.listening for comprehension 3. interpretation

Fig. # 7 The process of interpretation.

The complexity of the process,as discussed, is capable of creating many problems for foreign-language teaching. In this section we will suggest solutions to the problems.

The goal of a language teacher, generally speaking, is to see the students

pleasantly involved in communicative activities with speakers of the target language or at least capable of enjoying comprehensive activities such as listening and/or reading in that language. This goal, unfortunately, is hardly, if ever, reached in an EFL context. There are clearly many reasons why. In Italy, for example, foreign languages are most commonly taught for three hours a week in both Scuola Media and Scuola Superiore, with an average number of thirty students per class and almost non-existent materials. This constrained situation, added to the problems previously presented, makes the teaching of listening extremely hard. Unfortunately, the Italian language context, where for the largest number of teachers notions and functions (see Wilkins, 1976; Van Ek, 1975) are taught through translation and communicative activities through pattern-practice drills, is a living example of how the importance of listening activities has been underscored. However, things are slowly changing.

There is general agreement with the consideration that, in an EFL situation, listening and reading are the only two activities that can be done for pleasure, outside the class, as long as the learner has the right training. The training will consist of using the right tools to get the messages without being overwhelmed by the flow of speech and the vasteness of the written text. It is in the search for these tools that I have selected the following techniques, activities and materials which, far from being the port of arrival are to be considered the embarkation point for the land of solutions.

3.1.1. Techniques.

For the sake of clarity, I will divide the techniques into three groups: techniques to use before, during and after listening. Let's start with the pre-listening phase. It is generally accepted (see Rivers, 1983; Littlewood, 1981; Nord, 1976; Byrne, 1979; Brown and Yule, 1983, and many others) that pre-listening acti-

vities greatly help the comprehension of the text. The main goals consist of directing the attention of the learners to specific factors such as:

1. who is speaking (men, women, adults, children);
2. what the type of the text is (story, report, conversation, etc.);
3. what tone the story or conversation is narrated or carried on in (happy, sad, official, familiar, etc.);
4. where what they will hear takes place;
5. what it is all about (Nakić, 1981:11).

Elicitation questions, related to these five factors, have the great advantage of involving the students in expressing their expectations, in guessing what they will be exposed to and in motivating the entire process of interpretation. "The most important work that a listener can do ... is to predict what the speaker is likely to be going on to say" (Brown, 1978:278). This strategy, which is effortless in our native language (when familiar with the topic we can even anticipate what the speaker is going to say), is very helpful in second language acquisition. Rixon states that:

> Prediction of the probable content reduces the student's load to the task of understanding just enough of the language to enable him to match what he thinks the message is against what he already knows.. ..A listener who is confident in understanding every word and every implication contained in the passage will simultaneously be applying the next process; filtering the message for its relevance to his purpose in listening.... In any piece of listening, some of the language will be understood immediately, but a certain portion will be doubtfully understood and remain in a kind of 'comprehension limbo' until the listener can confirm or reject the various hypothesis he may have about its meaning. Some of the language will not be understood at all (1981:70-71).

She, then, uses figure # 8 to illustrate the process. Once expectations and presuppositions have been elicited from the students, the teacher should make clear that 100% comprehension while being difficult to obtain is not even necessary. In this way the students will feel psychologically released and better predisposed towards the listening activity.

Fig. # 8 From S. Rixon, 1978.

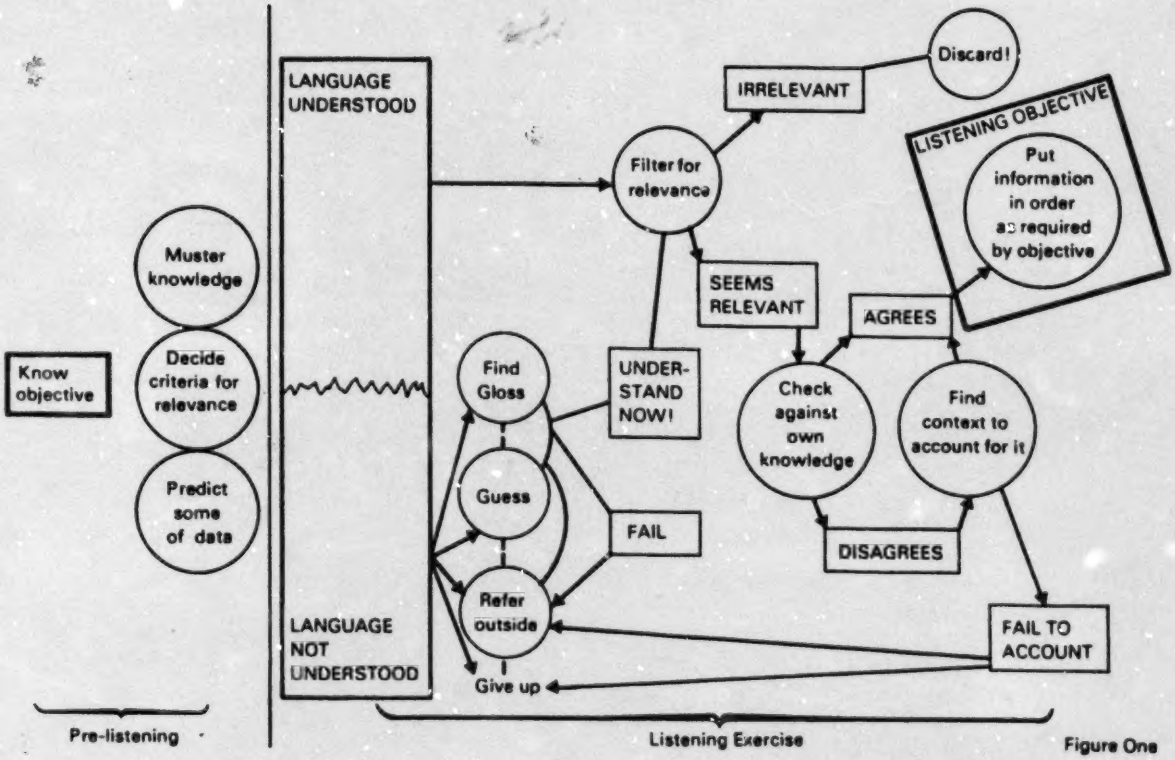


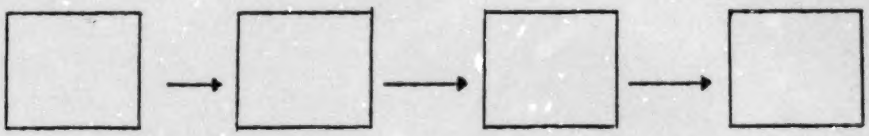
Figure One

The techniques to use in the inter-listening phase (during the activity) are related to the idea that if there is a task to accopmlish (filling a grid, answering questions, note-taking, etc.) the attention is better focused on what is heard and the interpretative process is simplified. Rivers said that:

> Listening should be accompained by some activity through which students can demonstrate their comprehension and experience the pleasure of success. If they can do this through some form of personal expression in speech or writing, they learn at the same time that comprehension of a message is part of a communicative act (1983:99).

The student's inter-listening task(s) will depend on the text s/he is exposed to. Diagrammatic worksheets (see fig. # 9) for example, will be very suitable when listening to a process, a series of actions, etc.; while grids (see fig. # 10) will be more valid for true/false checkings or for groupings of ideas, sets, etc. (see fig. # 11).

Fig. # 9



True	False

Fig. # 10

	likes	dislikes	neuter
Mary	cinema	pop music	TV
Mark			
George			
Debbie			

Fig. # 11

Post-listening techniques are closely related to the previous two phases. They can be conducted as a direct follow up of the elicitation phase or as a revision of the task completed during the listening itself. It is important that what is heard is "put to 'use' in some creative way, through innovative dramatizations, skits, games (see Lee, 1979), or the give-and-talk of conversation and discussion" (Rivers, 1972:75) since this helps the storage process.

To conclude we should say that the techniques to adopt will depend on the preparation age, and interest of the students, on the specific circumstances and finally on the available materials.

3.1.2. Activities.

Listening activities can be grouped in accordance with the task that we want our students to accomplish,. We can ask for either holistic or discrete comprehension. Table four contains the activities that my students have particularly enjoyed.

1. sequencing	(eg. follow directions, put pictures in order, etc.)
2. grouping	(eg. define Anne's likes and dislikes, etc.)
3. identifying	(eg. given a description identify the object, the person, etc.)
4. performing	(eg. listen and draw, listen and act, etc.)
5. constructing	(eg. make a recipe, make a muppet,etc.)
6. filling in	(eg. cloze exercises, forms,etc.)
7. interpreting	(eg. open dialogues, interviews, etc.)
8. note-taking	(eg. short and long lecturettes, monologues, etc.)
9. discussing	(eg. listen to these opinions and take a position, etc.)
10. concluding	(eg. complete the story, suggest the murderer, etc.)
11. answering	(eg. true/false, right/wrong exercises, etc.)
12. locating	(eg. say where John went looking at the map, etc.)
13. re-using	(eg. dicto-comps, use the information for a composition, etc.)
14. predicting	(eg. suggest Lori's reactions and listen to check, etc.)

Table # 4

The advantages of task-oriented activities lie in the fact that the learner is kept alert and that, when new information is processed by physically doing something, it is better remembered. The right solution/answer to the task will serve as immediate feedback for both the learner and the teacher. On one hand, whenever the task is accomplished, the learner's affective filter will be low and motivation increased; on the other the teacher will have no better feedback than successful completion of the comprehension task whether oral, written or physical.

3.1.3. Materials.

In an EFL teaching situation, listening materials are extremely important. They constitute unique real exposure to the target language, since for the largest part of their time the learners will be in linguistic contact with the teacher and his/her peers. It follows that they will be essentially exposed to a kind of somehow contrived language, unless the teacher is a native-speaker of the language under study. To overcome this problem and present the real target language we should use authentic materials (which is to say, materials not designed for teaching purposes) where the learner can experiment with his/her real capacity for comprehension. There is no general agreement in the field about whether to utilize real authentic, semi-authentic or script materials. The latest tendencies, however, opt for the first two types. The reason is that the classroom, in spite of all its limitations, is the only place where EFL students can be exposed to the target language. Authentic materials are more suitable for this purpose since they present the language as it is and as students will find it outside the class, in the real world. We should also say that the exposure to script materials, where the flow of speech is free from false starts, hesitations, redundancy, pauses, etc., has two negative effects: 1. it remains artificial; and 2. it is more difficult to be undertstood. Redundancy and pauses, in fact, are key elements of

the interpretation. They give time to human brains to process information, to match new experience with old and to extract the gist to store.

Authentic materials can be easily made by recording radio or, wherever possible, TV programmes (see table # 5 for initial ideas).

- news
- broadcast
- commercials
- interviews
- songs
- lecturettes
- documentary films
- reviews
- daily-programmes schedule
- telephone calls

Table # 5

Radio and TV programmes are, in fact, the most obvious sources of spontaneous conversation. Recordings of this type, while being inexpensive, offer another great advantage: they expose the learner to a variety of accents and dialects which otherwise s/he would never be familiar with. The teacher's task at this point will be to create suitable activities based on these recordings, exploiting the natural features and nuances of the language.

Conclusion.

We have seen that the process of interpretation is based on a series of variables which make the language learner's task difficult. We have enumerated a series of problems and suggested some solutions. We should add, to conclude, that listening activities take place in communicative exchanges where pleasure and/or interest are the motivating factors. We communicate to interpret what sorrounds us: our

realities. Thus, the language class, as fucina di nuovi uomini, should be the place where foreign students can enlarge their views of the world through a socio-psycho-cultural growth.

"Listen!" said Emelyn, "and you will interpret reality"

"Will I understand?" asked little Tommy.

"I don't know! Perceiving reality doesn't mean interpreting the world!"

-Lalla: The art of interpretation.

Notes:

1. For the pronunciation aspect of listening comprehension see Landolfi, 1983.

2. We have used a simplified version of Planchon's functions.

3. The list of possible interpretation could be longer.

4. Teachers generally adopt a particular kind of language within the class. The typical features of this genre have been pointed out by S.Brice Heath (1977). In short, teachers adopt a kind of 'motherese' or 'caretaker' speech which is closely related to the language used by adults when speaking to children. Gingras summarises the salient characteristics in this way:" Adults usually modify their speech by (a) constraining it to the 'here and now'; (b) using short, simple sentences that become more complex as the child matures; (c) repeating frequently; (d) slowing the rate down by inserting pauses; and (e) focussing correction on the message, not on the form" (1978:96).

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